

Jason Altmire (00:04):

Hello and welcome to another edition of Career Education Report, I am Jason Altmire. Today, we have Julie Peller as our guest. She's the Executive Director of Higher Learning Advocates. It's exciting for me because Julie was the Deputy Staff Director at the House Education and Labor Committee during the time I served in Congress, so we got to work with each other there. She moved on from there to join the Lumina Foundation, or at least immediately before her current role, she was at the Lumina Foundation. She created the foundation's strategy on federal policy, established its Washington office, and was the first director of federal policy. She's also worked at the Department of Education, so I can't think of anyone more qualified to talk about the current issues in education. I'll tell you why I wanted to have this conversation right now, but first of all, Julie, welcome to the program.

Julie Peller (01:05):

Thanks so much for having me. I'm happy to be here.

Jason Altmire (01:08):

I wanted to have you on right now because there was a podcast for Inside Higher Ed. There was a discussion, it was a group discussion that you were involved in, and the title of the podcast was, "Is for-Profit Higher Education on Its Last Legs?" The discussion revolved around University of Phoenix's rumored negotiation with the University of Arkansas and what that might mean for higher education. There was a lot of interesting discussion related to that and you, in particular, had some thoughts on that subject. Before we get into that, I wanted to ask you, first of all, can you talk about Higher Learning Advocates? It's an advocacy organization. What are your issues that you work on? What are some of the topics that are most important to you?

Julie Peller (01:56):

Higher Learning advocates, we are a bipartisan federal policy advocacy organization, which being bipartisan in the last six years has been an interesting adventure. Our central core is who we call today's students. We know that students on campuses, and in particular, the campuses that you all represent are not who Congress or movies or most people think of as college students. They're working, they're parenting, they're veterans, they have all sorts of other complicating factors and our federal policies just don't match up with that reality. We look into federal policy changes that changes that system largely through bringing in changes that can ensure people have, they have an interruption on higher education that can come back and still retain their eligibility for federal student aid that costs such as childcare or transportation or broadband access don't kick them out. Then finally, we look to see how we can bridge the gap between higher education and workforce training and other ways of earning skills and break down those silos for learners.

Jason Altmire (03:10):

We at Career Education Colleges and Universities, of course, share many of those goals, all of them, and we represent primarily the proprietary sector within career education. We do have some non-profit members as well. I wanted to ask, in particular, you mentioned that your organization is a bipartisan advocacy organization. How do you measure bipartisanship? Is it the type of people that work for you? Is it the issues that you're talking about, the members of Congress with whom you have relationships? How are you defining bipartisanship?

Julie Peller (03:48):

Sure. It is really about the issues and the people, the members of Congress that we work with. We put students at the center and are excited to work with any member who shares our agenda in putting students at the center. We also actively look for incremental policy change, where we can get support from both sides of the aisle and move things along. It is certainly the people who work for us and the people who are on our board share that goal and that mission, but it really shows up the most in our work.

Jason Altmire (04:25):

I saw on your list of issues on your website that you deal with and priorities on which your organization is focused, you talk a lot about accountability and outcomes. Can you talk about how you frame that discussion and how you frame the thinking of the organization on that?

Julie Peller (04:43):

As you know, and as I'm sure many of your listeners do as well, accountability and outcomes is not or has not been looked at as a bipartisan topic for quite some time in federal policy, but we look at it and say, from a learner's perspective, what are the things that learners need to know and what is the appropriate federal role in ensuring that there's at least a bare minimum of accountability? I also feel strongly that when we talk about accountability and outcomes, we're really particular in addressing measures and approaches to accountability to solve for the problem that we're after. I think too often we look to say, "Oh, well, this particular measure, [inaudible 00:05:33] measure, solves for what students need to know, what federal policy makers need to know, what institutions need to have continuous improvement and what accreditors need to know. When really, those might be four or five different conversations that we need to have and we need to be really specific on when we have a policy measure around accountability that we're asking and answering the right question.

Jason Altmire (05:57):

We talk a lot about accountability and, of course, our sector is a focus of public policy as it relates to outcomes and accountability. We have said very clearly countless times that we do not oppose accountability measures. We simply want them to be applied across the board equally to all schools in all sectors. We're not afraid of accountability measures. We're not afraid of people looking at outcomes. We just feel like all schools in all sectors should have to play by the same rules, so that all students can benefit from those same accountability measures. Where is your organization on that idea?

Julie Peller (06:37):

I think, by and large, we're in agreement that quality and accountability does not have a profit status tag to it, that students deserve high quality no matter the type of institution that they're at. This goes back to my point about specific conversations and specific outcomes that we're going for. I do think there are appropriate times to say, what is the entire menu of oversight and accountability for a particular institution? That does look different for public institutions versus for-profit institutions versus private non-profit institutions, and that's really the conversation that we should be having of where things might be different to make sure that there's a full ... things that states might look at for public institutions. What is the role, if any, for the federal government, for other types of institutions there? I think we're by and large in the same place, but I do think that there are some types to have a different level of conversation, largely because of non-federal oversight involvement.

Jason Altmire ([07:44](#)):

When we first got to know each other, we were working during the Obama administration. It was actually, when we first started, it was during the Bush administration. But during the Obama administration, of course, the work of the Education and Labor Committee in the US House was focused on many different issues. No child left behind in K through 12 issues, but as it relates to higher ed, a major focus of the Obama administration was on the for-profit sector, and it started under Secretary Duncan. I remember those discussions being very one-sided, at least in my opinion, the accountability measures focusing only on the for-profit sector and we're about to head now more than a decade later into a new era of gainful employment, rule-making. There's a proposed rule pending on that.

([08:39](#)):

We have, of course, implemented a 90/10 rule, a borrower defense rule, which is subject to litigation right now. Of course, the Trump administration came in and overturned a lot of what President Obama had done. It's likely a new president in a new administration would do the same were these current regulations to survive the litigation. What can we do to prevent that pendulum from swinging back and forth and having a sustained effort on accountability that can be carried forward across multiple administrations in a more permanent way?

Julie Peller ([09:15](#)):

That would be lovely. I think the instability of the swinging back and forth more than anything has created so much confusion and held back the quality and value conversation that learners want, that institution leaders want, that policy makers really want. It's amazing to think 12 years later, we're still having a conversation about gainful employment. I remember those hearings and those conversations, and it feels like we do keep coming back to it. I think the answer that's missing in all of these quality conversations is we, we being the federal government, we being the stakeholders as Americans, want out of investment in higher education for people. No Child Left Behind is a really good example where Congress came around college and career-ready as a goal for people graduating high school.

([10:12](#)):

We can argue about whether or not that was right now that it was implemented, but we don't have that tagline for, we want people to leave college with a credential that can lead to economic mobility, where they can repay back their debt, where they're employed, where they can go to graduate school and be an informed voter. What's the thing we're after? I think that's really what's holding us back on the debate of what we're measuring because we haven't come together in a bipartisan way to say, "What we're measuring is this particular aspect of what's a good outcome." Once we can agree on that, I think then it becomes a much more, perhaps not easy, but at least directional conversation around quality and accountability.

Jason Altmire ([11:03](#)):

A very positive aspect of that very debate recently led by a number of groups, including Third Way and others, is Return on Investment being an aspect that people are looking at with regard to the student investment and the taxpayer investment in higher education. What does higher learning advocates say about that?

Julie Peller ([11:24](#)):

I think that's a really smart way to think about it. To think about value as a return and the idea of a return on investment, both for the taxpayer and for the learner gets at this issue of the investment is a private investment, but it's also a public investment. Looking at both of those aspects is good. There's so much devil on the details of return on investment over how long and what is a good return and a not good return, but I'd much rather be having that conversation than debating on whether or not a return at all makes sense.

[\(12:07\)](#):

One level that I would put in that is to think about a return on investment, not with a layer of economic mobility as part of that. It's a lot harder to measure, and I think we're further away from being able to put metrics the way that third way and others have put around the ROI. But my hope is that we could be striving for not only a one-to-one return, but how is higher education an investment in post-secondary education moving people along in terms of economic mobility.

Jason Altmire [\(12:42\)](#):

The podcast that I referred to earlier, Inside Higher Ed, was called "Is for-Profit Higher Education on Its Last Legs?" and you were a panelist on that. Rather than me characterizing what you said, can you summarize what your views were and continue to be on that issue?

Julie Peller [\(13:01\)](#):

Yeah. I think that certainly the major growth and retraction in the field could be seen as is it going away? I don't think for-profit education is ever going to go away, particularly in, we're seeing learners want more flexible options with higher education. We're seeing learners want more career-connected options in higher education. We're seeing learners want higher education that fits their lives and fits and recognizes and honors the skills of learning that they have before coming into that institution's door. Those are all places where for-profit education has led the fields in the past. I think in that particularly around career connected education or more technical pathways, that growth and that demand from learners will certainly continue.

Jason Altmire [\(13:58\)](#):

The topic of that podcast as the conversation developed with the panel focused mostly on the University of Phoenix and the potential transition to University of Arkansas, but a more generalized discussion of that type of school, the more four year often liberal arts online component, which is a little bit different than what you were just talking about with regard to career education, more along the trades and certificate level programs and others. Do you see a distinction in your point of view, what you just described about the future of for-profit education?

Julie Peller [\(14:41\)](#):

I do see a distinction there, particularly with the large public and non-profit institutions doing so much more on the online space, whether through a merger with the University of Phoenix, if that comes through fruition or through online program managers or just in-house. I think that there's more direct competition in that four-year liberal arts degree pathway that at least from an outsider's perspective, feels like it presents more risk to the for-profit field than really where I was talking about before with the career space. I think that's where the attention seems to be from the non-profit space as well, when you think about online and it is much more in that replacement of or addition to the on-campus liberal

arts type pathway. Students might not see the niche as much in for-profits for that other more stereotypically traditional pathway.

Jason Altmire ([15:44](#)):

The online education component before COVID, there were more critics of that part of the sector than perhaps there are today, although there are still certainly very vocal critics. But what we saw with Kaplan and Purdue Global, certainly University of Arizona, which got off to a little bit of a rocky start in their transition, I think it's fair to say, now University of Phoenix. Given what happened with COVID and the fact that there were literally lawsuits filed by parents about whether or not this is still a quality education if it's an online setting, and it was shown to be, yes, it is still a credible, very high-quality educational experience, so it's a little bit different debate.

([16:32](#)):

The innovations and the technology that were brought forward by some of these for-profit schools that we're talking about have now been absorbed and copied and modeled by more traditional higher education moving towards online. The future will continue to come. There are some that may want to turn the clock back and continue to cast that type of criticism on online programming, and you see that debate playing out in California, for example. But what do you think as an organization and just you personally about the future of online education and the public acceptance that revolves around that?

Julie Peller ([17:11](#)):

Oh, I think the cat's out of the bag. Higher education has gone online, just like for many people work has gone online. I think that you think of traditional age students, we now have a cohort of children who have gone through some level of schooling in K-12 online. They're going to expect and be used to that and post-secondary learning. We have adult learners who are, many of whom are working from home, from their computers, and who value the flexibility of being able to both be in working, picking up their kids from school when they need to, and being able to be enrolled in post-secondary learning. I think it's here to stay. The hybrid nature, I imagine comes back. Right there, some learners who don't do well online, and there are some learners who be better online, and there's some subjects that are better in person and those will always remain. I think the hybrid factor stays.

([18:17](#)):

During COVID, I bristled quite a bit at the painting all of online education as low quality. There was a lot of taking what was happening in the classroom and bringing it online as needed to happen in such an emergency. But as we know, true distance learning and quality online education has so much more behind that than taking what was happening in an in-person environment and putting it on a computer. I think those innovations, those iterations, those places where frankly the for-profit sector really has led and will continue to lead is really the places where online education will grow and where learners will demand it.

Jason Altmire ([19:04](#)):

It's interesting the way this is played out with non-profit schools and especially large public universities. You have, for example, Southern New Hampshire University Western Governors that their business model was created around this idea that this could be done in an effective way. You have large universities like Penn State University, Maryland Global, that have gone all in on the online component very successfully with good outcomes. Then you have schools, we mentioned Purdue and Arizona,

potentially Arkansas, that have decided that acquiring, merging with for-profit schools that have done this, what do you think the future is with regard to that? Because that seems to be a more along the lines of if we can't beat them, join them model versus just starting it from scratch on their own.

Julie Peller ([20:00](#)):

I think we'll continue to see a variety of different approaches of acquiring schools, building things. Then, the growth in online program managers, which are not quite for-profit institutions, but are certainly for-profit entities as ways to build those online programs and bring them to scale largely by the non-profit sector are different ways to go at the problem. Enrollments are coming back, but there was a dip across most of higher education in enrollment during the pandemic, and we saw the places that were adaptable to people's needs and able to go online were where people stayed. I think it's logical that all of higher education's going to be looking for ways to go about that.

Jason Altmire ([20:52](#)):

Our guest today has been Julie Peller, Executive Director of Higher Learning Advocates. Julie, if somebody wanted to get in touch with you to learn more about what you do, how would they find you?

Julie Peller ([21:03](#)):

Our website is [higherlearningadvocates.org](https://higherlearningadvocates.org).

Jason Altmire ([21:07](#)):

Easy enough. Do you have social media?

Julie Peller ([21:08](#)):

We do. We're on both on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok as well at Higher Learn ADB in pretty much all of those places.

Jason Altmire ([21:20](#)):

Julie Peller, thank you for being with us. Thanks for joining me for this episode of the Career Education Report. Subscribe and rate us on Apple Podcast, Google Play, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. For more information, visit our website at [career.org](https://career.org) and follow us on Twitter @CECUED. That's @CECUED. Thank you for listening.